

## Sonnet XIII

### *Glossary*

wilt	will
thou	you
thee	you
fashion	craft, make
torch	burning light
rending	tearing, cutting
dauntless	resolute, bold, fearless
fortitude	courage, resilience, strength

### *Summary*

This sonnet is addressed to the persona's lover. It seems to be a response for his desire for her to speak aloud her love. The persona feels she cannot do this. The octet uses the extended metaphor of a burning torch and the inability the persona feel of holding it to their faces to shed light on each.

The sestet is more forceful and the persona realises how uncertain she is of the relationship. The demand of the lover has made her acknowledge her own concerns.

### *Discussion*

The poem is written in the second person, addressed to the lover of the persona. Starting with the conjunction, "And", the opening line of the sonnet seems mid-discussion-

*And wilt thou have me fashion into speech  
The love I bear thee*

The persona seems to be replying to her lover's demand. The formality of the language is emphasised by the archaic terms "wilt", "thou" and "thee". This effectively distances the persona and helps emphasise the discomfort the request causes her. The use of the question further shows her doubt, even amazement at the appeal.

She terms the words of love a "torch". The fire imagery here (remember in the mid nineteenth century Barrett Browning is not speaking of a plastic torch with batteries!) emphasises the ferocity of such words for her and the inability of her hold on them. She uses the torch image to represent the difficulty of bringing out her emotions. The torch's light will affect both, "Between our faces, to cast light on each". She is unable to illuminate herself and him together which metaphorically represents the candid expression of her feelings to him directly. The tone is incredulous and highly sceptical. The ellipsis after the question mark is unorthodox but serves to emphasise these feelings.

Instead she can "drop it at thy feet". While she cannot be so brazen with her feelings to put them in his she can manage this much. It is not that she does not love him but that she is so fearful of saying it explicitly. Her fear is captured well in the connotations of "drop" – she cannot bear to hold the torch for long. Metaphorically, she cannot make extended public declarations of love.

We know Barrett Browning felt isolated and in darkness prior to Browning's wooing (as revealed in Sonnet 1). It is logical she would not find it easy to express her deepest emotions. She is not entirely certain of love – her own or

his. We know from many of the other sonnets that she found it difficult to believe Browning's love and desire for her – six years older, an invalid and inexperienced in relationships.

She then continues to use the torch image to speak of being unable to separate her spirit from herself in order to speak such words. Here the repetition of the ellipses reflects her inarticulate stumbling, especially before the term "love", as even this explanation is incredibly difficult:

*I cannot teach  
My hand to hold my spirit so far off  
From myself . . . me . . . that I should bring thee proof  
In words . . . of love hid in me out of reach*

There is also a sense of the superficiality of such "words". They seem so flimsy and meaningless that their weight as "proof" of love seems unlikely. The placement of "In words" in the next line from "proof" creates a hesitation further emphasises by the following ellipsis. This encourages us to dismiss the significance of "finding words" for love. The doubt then moved from the ability to provide the words to the need to.

Consequently the sestet begins with greater strength, "Nay, -". She has reached a decision and it is against such public declaration. She takes refuge in her femininity and speaks of the "silence of my womanhood", implying it is naturally womanly to be coy about such things. Here the Victorian expectations of women as demure and shy are being exploited.

The persona says the lover should also know, "I stand unwon, however wooed". Here there is the idea that she is

exploits  
expectations  
of  
women

certainly interested but not certain about the implications of such a love. Perhaps his insistence on declarations has worried her. It is not that she is not affected by love. Indeed her life has been torn apart by the strength of the love she cannot express in speech:

Rending the garment of my life  
By a dauntless, voiceless fortitude

power of love

The image of the "garment" of her life being torn is powerful and also rather Shakespearian. There is a sense of her own life's essential superficiality in the clothing image. The repetition of "less" and the rhythmic stresses give "dauntless, voiceless fortitude" a musical resonance that adds to the power of the realisation. The final line conveys uncertainty and it is suggested there is a fear of being hurt by the "love hid in me out of reach". The image of this love is not only hidden but also protected. Of course, the vulnerability in opening ourselves to others is always a danger – especially when it is an action never really undertaken before as it would have been for the isolated and often melancholy Barrett Browning.

Therefore this sonnet begins in response to a lover's demand but ends with the realisation of the uncertainty and perhaps unsuitability of love. Barrett Browning found it very difficult to reconcile Browning's easy love of her with her feelings of hesitation and reticence. You might see this notion of grief as paradoxical. It was not that she did not feel powerful emotion but that the demands of such love were hard to reconcile with her previous life and expectations of her future. Also, remember too that the love ironically brought grief as it meant her father's displeasure and estrangement. There was a conflict between paternal love and romantic passion.

cost of love ?

## Ideas

### The threat of love – love can bring injury

This poem exposes the vulnerability we can expose ourselves to when in love. The persona is unable to candidly open herself to speak words of love to her lover. While this reflects her own situation, being relatively inexperienced in these feelings it also reminds us of the risk involved in relationships. There is always the danger of being hurt. Our love is a weakness and can render us powerless.

We saw this in the image of the persona being pulled by the hair in Sonnet I and here she cannot ignore the lover's demands. The compulsion of the persona to at least drop the torch at her lover's feet shows she cannot stop herself from saying something. It is also shown in the uncertainty the persona feels in the sestet. While her life has been torn apart she is uncertain, "unwon", and not completely positive about these amazing feelings she has. Of course we must remember that she knew she would have to leave her family to be with Browning and this must have contributed to her uncertainty.

cannot ignore

### The power and nature of love

Again the power of love is demonstrated by this sonnet. As explained, the speaker cannot ignore the lover. She also uses the powerful image of her life being torn: "Rending the garment of my life". She seems to be made very vulnerable by the power of the love she feels. The final line conveys a sense of fragility, as if she is in a delicate balance, trying to maintain control.

power of love

## demands of love — changes

Love also brings with it demands. Once we entwine with another, that person cannot really be ignored. The effect of Browning insisting on words of love is what stimulates this sonnet. Barrett Browning's life has been irrevocably changed and she cannot ignore his entreaties or her own feelings.

*male dominance*  
The dominance of the male is keenly shown in the sonnet. It is he who is the aggressor, forcing her to speak out her feelings. Barrett Browning lives in a patriarchal society and this is reflected in her work. However, her particular situation in life regarding her health and her father's reluctance for suitors has meant she is very inexperienced and powerless. In a society that dismissed women near thirty as too old to marry, Barrett Browning would have been understandably weakened considerably, despite her academic brilliance.

*exploits stereotypes of women*  
The persona resorts to her femaleness to add weight to her argument. She speaks of her "womanhood" and her "woman-love". Here she is exploiting the stereotyped softness and affection associated with women. This is especially so in the Victorian Era where women tended to be revered for such feminine, rather vulnerable qualities and damned if they did not exhibit them. Barrett Browning is projecting herself in this supremely loving role, and asks her lover to believe her love based on this.

*sadness*  
*Love's strength in a harsh world*

The underlying harshness of the world is implied in the final line. There is the suggestion that the persona is being torn and her past sadness is not forgotten. The fragility and reticence of the speaker is seen to be a direct result of her prior experiences.

## Sonnet XIII - Questions

1. Summarise this poem in FIVE points.
2. In your own words, explain how Barrett Browning makes the image of the "torch" an effective way to represent her inability to speak words of love.
3. a. Examine the structure of the sonnet. Summarise its features (ie. rhyme scheme, line stresses, line syllables, idea development)  
b. How tightly is it organised?
4. Explain how Barrett Browning has used punctuation to help represent her ideas.
5. What is the effect of emphasising her femaleness?
6. a. Rewrite the sonnet in a modern formal style. Try and capture the feelings the speaker has for her lover. Try and follow at least the rhyme scheme for your sonnet.  
b. Reflect on the difficulty of writing ideas in a sonnet like this. How restrictive was it?